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SPECIAL MEMORANDUM

Nigeria: How the Civil War May End

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No. 2-69
3 February 1969

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

3 February 1969

SPECIAL MEMORANDUM NO. 2-69

SUBJECT: Nigeria: How the Civil War May End*

SUMMARY

Biafra's prospects, which reached a low point last autumn, have improved. If the airlift of arms and food from abroad continues near the present level, then Biafra's chances of obtaining independence or a wide measure of autonomy will increase. The military stalemate is generating war-weariness and new frictions in the Federal area of Nigeria. Another coup attempt, led either by hawkish northern officers or by war-weary Yorubas, may be in the offing. Such an attempt, whether or not immediately successful, would probably lead to the break-up of the remaining Nigerian Federation and so hamper the war effort as to give Biafra victory by default.

*This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of National Estimates and coordinated with the Office of Current Intelligence and the Office of Economic Research.

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1. The 19-month old Nigerian civil war has thus far enabled the Federal Military Government (FMG) to paper over the underlying frictions in federal Nigeria and to postpone some difficult problems. Still unresolved are the fundamental issues of state versus federal authority and the distribution of power among the contending tribes. But as the conflict drags on with no end in sight, war-weariness and tribal frictions are beginning to surface. Moreover, the economic impact of the civil war is just beginning to be felt by urban and other tax-paying Nigerians and by the deficit-ridden state governments which depend on large subsidies from Lagos.

2. General Gowon's government seems threatened from two sides. The hawks -- mostly northern army officers -- feel he has deferred too much to world opinion and pressures from the governments of Western nations on behalf of the suffering civilians in Biafra and thereby enabled reeling Biafrans to regain their balance. These hawks urge a more ruthless policy to win the war quickly. The doves -- Yoruba politicians and probably some officers from western Nigeria -- resent bearing what they feel is a disproportionate share of the war costs and have never been keen on forcing Biafra to submit. Many,

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perhaps most, Yorubas now see the war as unwinnable. Moreover, the Yorubas have always resented northern domination of the Federal government, are uneasy about their subordinate status, and probably find the notion of an independent Yoruba state increasingly attractive.

Riots in the Western State

3. Discontent is most evident in the Western State where the situation is highly reminiscent of the months immediately preceding the January 1966 coup that led eventually to the civil war. The Yoruba-run regime in the Western State is notoriously corrupt, inefficient, and daily becoming more unpopular. Taxes have gone up and the federal subsidy to the state government has declined. Now as in the earlier crisis, many Yoruba feel they are not receiving their fair share of benefits, especially since the Western State's cocoa provides a large share of Federal revenue while the cocoa farmer gets relatively little. Anti-tax riots and political assassinations, often incited by the political outs and their hired thugs, have occurred with increasing frequency since last November. The toll of deaths -- well over 100 -- and property damages is

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mounting, and army units have been called in to aid the local police in quelling disorders. Neither the state nor the federal military government has shown any inclination to get at the roots of the trouble nor have they devised effective measures for stopping the disorders.

4. The situation in the west is almost certain to get worse if the war drags on. Yoruba impatience is likely to grow, and with it, riots and killings. Some western leaders are already openly accusing the FMG, particularly the military commanders (most of whom are non-Yoruba) of prolonging the war in order to increase their personal profits. There is ample evidence that many officers, including field commanders, are enriching themselves. More obvious to the bulk of the Yorubas are the various extortions practiced by the army in the Western State. Soldiers stationed in the west, deserters and men posing as army officers are increasingly preying on the merchants, holding up travellers at road blocks, and fleecing the population in general.

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Discontent Elsewhere

5. Although the other new states are currently more peaceful than the Western State, they are experiencing much tribal dissension as they attempt to set up and run their new administrations. In some, non-natives are being pushed out of office, even where natives with the required skills are lacking. Where indigenous tribal groups are contesting for office, the losers are angrily calling for new states of their own. Energies are largely absorbed by these contests and few are in a position either to sponsor a coup or to help in crushing one.

6. The former ruling northern aristocracy is by no means reconciled to the breakup of the old feudal regime that until recently ran the north and, in effect, the whole country. They can be expected to resist further diminution of their influence. The minority tribes, particularly those from the north, are the core of the Federal army and strong supporters of the new state system as a bulwark against an aristocratic resurgence. Although these new states are desperately short of funds and feel neglected by the FMG, we doubt that they will trouble Gowon, at least so long as the war goes on.

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Biafra Struggles On

7. Biafrans are the only group in black Africa to have fought for their independence and the process appears to have forged a kind of national cohesion unique in that area. Morale remains high despite shortages and sizeable human and material losses. Between July 1967 and September 1968, Biafra was reduced to less than one-fourth its original size. It now covers about 7,000 square miles and contains 6-7 million people, nearly half of whom are refugees. They have shown extraordinary inventiveness in the face of blockade, war, and territorial losses. They remain well organized and capable of producing a wide variety of essential goods despite the loss of their main refinery, power plants, and manufacturing centers. The ordinary Ibo, both civilian and military, is convinced he is fighting for his life and Colonel Ojukwu has come to symbolize the Ibo spirit of resistance. While there may be some disagreements among influential Biafrans, Colonel Ojukwu's important leadership role does not appear seriously threatened. Should he die in office, Biafra would probably fight on.

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8. Militarily, Biafra is almost entirely dependent on a clandestine night airlift mainly from Libreville and Abidjan for arms and ammunition. A few guerilla bands operating beyond the lines capture some weapons. Funds for imported arms now appear to come mainly from friendly governments [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] and from charitable organizations engaged in supplying food, medicines and money for the needy. A few foreign business firms may have been willing to speculate on a Biafran victory but we doubt that funds from this source have been very large. [REDACTED]

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9. The well-publicized plight of the refugees and other helpless civilians has garnered much sympathy abroad and considerable assistance. The food situation has improved since last autumn as the main crops were harvested and the airlift of relief supplies increased. The most critical current shortage is of protein, particularly for the hundreds of thousands in refugee camps or without access to the land. The International Red Cross airlift alone had been feeding

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more than 800,000 until it was stopped by the government of Equatorial Guinea in early January. Although other airlifts from the Portuguese island of Sao Tome and from Libreville in Gabon continue, the plight of those dependent on the Red Cross is likely to worsen rapidly in the next few weeks unless the Red Cross finds ways to resume its efforts. Moreover, locally grown staples will become even scarcer soon because, even in normal times, this area had to import food in the spring months and it now must support a greatly enlarged population. Biafra, however, probably would accept a higher rate of death from starvation before surrendering.

The War

10. Under present conditions, it appears unlikely that Biafra will be defeated militarily. It would require the withdrawal of French support, or more direct foreign intervention on behalf of the Federal forces, or a drastic deterioration in Biafra's food supplies -- none of which seem probable. If French support should be increased, as is possible, then Biafra would stand a fair chance of successfully counter-attacking.

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11. The FMG employs a number of foreign pilots and is getting all the arms it needs from the UK, USSR, and elsewhere. It lacks the will, the logistical skills, and the effective discipline and leadership necessary to win. While the Biafran soldier is convinced he is fighting for his life, the Federal soldier is told to fight for the unity of a country he can barely conceive of. He probably joined the army not for love of country or even because he hated the Ibo, but because the pay is not bad and he can show off among the civilians. His division commanders run their own campaigns pretty much as they see fit. Each lobbies with the central government for materiel and personnel. Troop discipline, especially in the two northern-led divisions, seems to depend largely on tribal ties and on conditions at the front. Mutinies and inter-tribal clashes among the troops have already broken out on a few occasions and successful Biafran counter-attacks could lead to even more serious disarray in the federal army.

12. The war has been stalemated since last September when Biafra's arms supplies increased significantly. Even if the next Federal offensive, scheduled for some time between February

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and March, should capture Biafra's one working airfield less than 12 miles inside the lines, another airstrip is in readiness. Federal planes have tried but failed to bomb the airfield out of commission or otherwise interdict the 10 to 20 planes that now land in Biafra on the average night. Moreover, the FMG is unable or unwilling to attack the relief aircraft that fly at the same times and over much the same routes as the arms planes. Nevertheless, the airlift remains highly vulnerable to more aggressive tactics and improved ordnance.

The Outlook

13. While we cannot predict with confidence which of several courses events in Nigeria will take, the signs point to a further disintegration of Nigerian unity. The war is likely to drag on for months without much change. So long as it does, unrest in the Western State is likely to deepen, leading the Yorubas to press for some settlement which would allow Biafra a large measure of autonomy at least. They would then probably demand the same status for themselves. If the Yorubas despair of achieving such an end, they will be increasingly tempted to try to change the government or to

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opt out of the federation. In either event, the FMG would probably resist such an attempt with force and would find it difficult to sustain the war with Biafra.

14. As time goes on, the hawkish elements are likely to be more tempted to oust the present leaders and try more ruthless methods to end the war. They now blame outside interference for the failure to defeat Biafra. Public sentiment, especially in the north, is turning strongly anti-Western. France, the US, the Red Cross and other charitable institutions, even the UK at times, are seen as the enemies of Nigerian unity. Calls for expulsion of missionaries and Peace Corps personnel, for breaking diplomatic relations with France, even for expropriating foreign-owned firms are mounting. So long as Biafra gets food and arms from outside and the stalemate continues, this anger and frustration is likely to grow and could easily turn against General Gowon for being too soft.

15. A northern coup seems somewhat more likely than a Yoruba coup, because it would probably be organized by military leaders who stand in no awe of their colleague, General Gowon. Should such a coup succeed, the new rulers would probably be

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determined to push for a military victory and would be much less concerned about international public opinion. They would probably expel the Red Cross from the territory under Federal control, and have far less hesitation about trying to shoot down relief planes. Successful attacks on these planes would in turn probably arouse still greater sympathy for the starving civilians and induce many Western governments to make still stronger representations on behalf of relief efforts. The Nigerian government would almost certainly interpret this as gross interference in Nigeria's internal affairs and might allow its anger to be taken out on Westerners and Western interests in the country.

16. Moreover, a new government run by predominantly northern hawks would be even less acceptable to the Yorubas than the present relatively moderate and ineffectual regime. Yorubaland might finally despair of ever getting a fair share and attempt to secede. At that point, tribal frictions in the army could well erupt into mutinies or widespread fighting. The men and arms necessary to subdue even a badly organized Yoruba uprising would have to come largely from the best

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northern troops on the Biafran front. In the resulting confusion, it would be very difficult for the FMG to maintain a semblance of national unity. Biafra would probably win by default and other states, particularly in the far north, would probably go their own way.

17. If General Gowon's government manages to remain in power, rising discontent at the cost of the war is likely to make a negotiated settlement more attractive as the stalemate continues. We doubt that Gowon could begin real negotiations without the approval of the hawks. If he made concessions at a peace conference, he would be likely to be in real trouble with them. Biafra's strategy, on the other hand, is to hang on in hopes that internal pressures will eventually force the FMG to give up and allow it either a wide measure of autonomy or complete independence. And the odds seem to be changing in Biafra's favor.

18. Whether the fighting is ended by negotiations, by a coup or an uprising, or degenerates into guerilla warfare, the result will probably lead to either a loose confederation of semi-independent states or the formation of three or more

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completely independent countries. In either event, the USSR as the most active supporter of the present FMG policy would lose some influence. The West could probably live with most if not all of the resulting states who would seek a considerable amount of post-war assistance. An independent Biafra, Western State, and even several northern states would be at least as viable as most West African countries.

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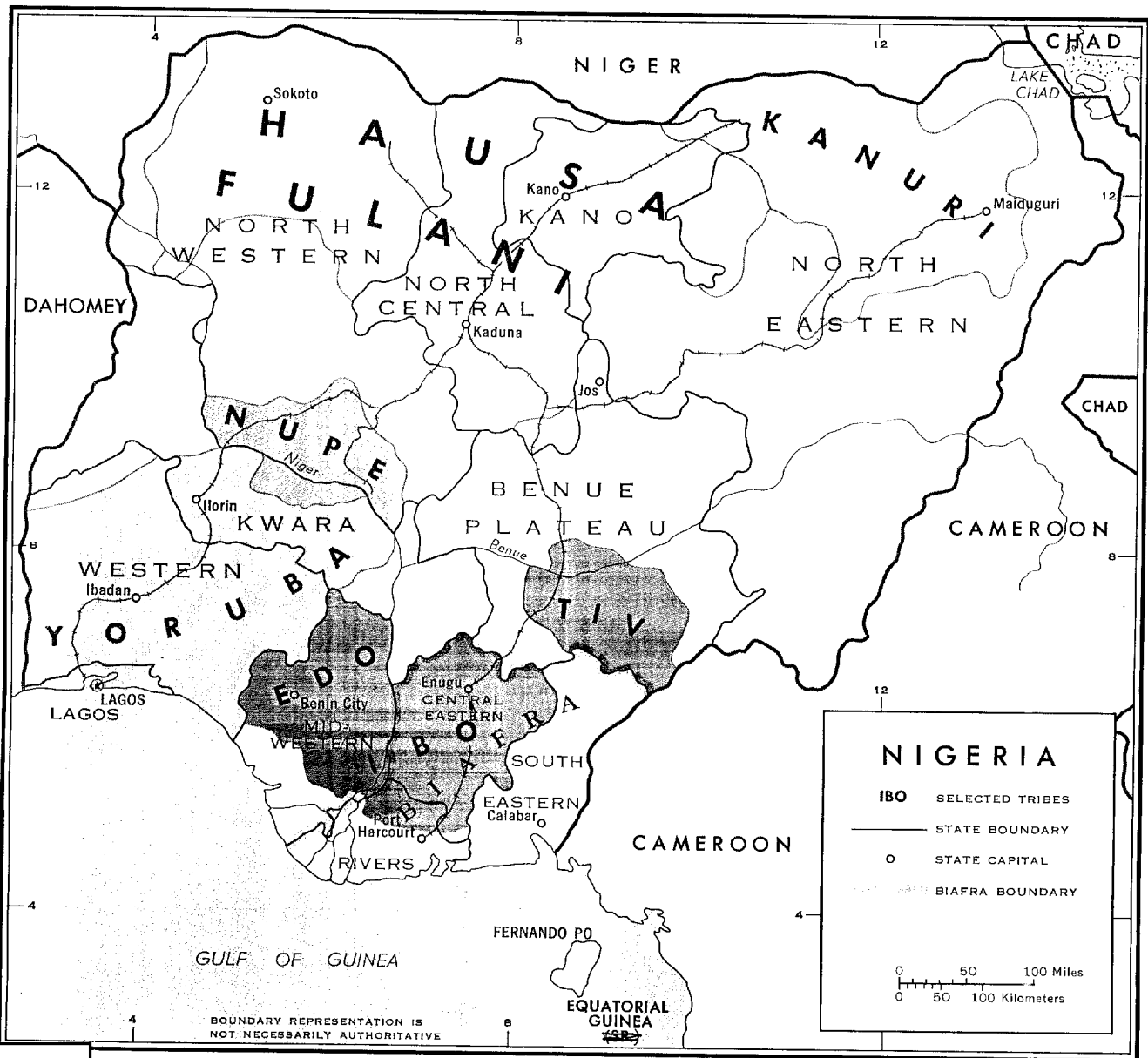
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ABBOT SMITH
Chairman

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